

Stairway to Heaven:



A closer look at the inclusiveness and accessibility of the United Methodist Church

Socially, the United Methodist Church as a whole is a welcoming organization to all people. However, in some churches like Wesley United Methodist Church, the altar can be a barrier between a person in a wheelchair and a more personal relationship with God. The United Methodist Church is all about inclusion and recognizing the rights of people with disabilities, but these people are physically unable to access the place of greatest communion with God. Because of this seemingly small conflict, the United Methodist Church seems to have abandoned its primary mission of bringing all people into greatest contact with God.

In order to come to my conclusions, many resources were used including archival materials, interviews, observation, and current websites. The archival research was very slow and unproductive at first, but it lead to some very good findings. First, I looked in the University of Illinois archives and was surprised to see that there were a few boxes dedicated specifically to the Wesley Church and Foundation. Unfortunately, the multitude of bulletins and other miscellaneous papers I spent hours flipping though were not useful to my research. This seemingly dead end was only a road block. From talking to one of the pastors at the Wesley Foundation, I discovered that Wesley has its own archival room with boxes upon boxes of more useful information than what was at the university. I worked with the Wesleyan archivist to narrow down the boxes to what would pertain to my project. From there, I went through all of the folders in four boxes reading letter after letter and looking at all kinds of documents related to different aspects of the church and foundation. I found multiple resources including letters and committee recommendations that would help me develop my project. This archival research helped look into the past of the Wesley Foundation and Church to see what and why renovations to the building were made to accommodate people with disabilities.

To get a more personal view of the Wesley Foundation and Church, I interviewed one of the pastors, Rev. Kirby. He has a lot of insight into the interworkings of the church. He is also very personable and therefore knows almost everyone in the church. Because of this, Rev. Kirby was able to tell me about individual cases of people with disabilities and how they were accommodated. He was a very good source in my research as well as a guide to more possible places for research.

Personal observation was also used in my research. On a Sunday morning I sat by the set of automatic doors at Wesley and kept track of how many and what kind of people used the doors.

I chose the automatic doors instead of the elevator, for instance, because there is more traffic through the doors than on the elevator on any given day. Also, the doors can either be used as normal functioning doors or as automatic doors, so I could keep track of how many people used the doors in one way versus the other. It turns out that about half of the people going through this set of doors used the automatic function even though only a handful were disabled or appeared to need the automatic doors. Finally, website research was used to get a feel for the greater outlook of my project instead of strictly keeping my paper focused on the Wesley Church and Foundation. The United Methodist Church website was very helpful in finding specific denomination-wide views on the topic of disability.

The United Methodist Church is taking an active role of integrating people with disabilities into society. "... [T]here is a world society that also must be made aware of the concerns and needs of these persons. ... We pledge ourselves to an inclusive, compassionate, and creative response to the needs and gifts of people with mental, physical, and/or psychological disabilities" ("The Church and People with...Disabilities"). The United Methodist Church promises "Open hearts. Open minds. Open Doors." The church community is open to *everyone*, including people of various backgrounds, skin colors, and abilities. "We [as United Methodists] affirm all persons as equally valuable in God's sight. ... We urge social practices that will uphold the rights of religious minorities, of children, youth, young adults, and the aging, of women, and of disabled persons" ("Church and Society").

Wesley United Methodist Church and Foundation at the University of Illinois is a fairly good example of how these principles of inclusiveness are applied. The building is almost fully handicap accessible. One of the elevators was installed "to serve paraplegics and elderly who may wish to go from office level in foundation building to second floor and/or to Watseka Lounge

level” (“Building Rehabilitation and Improvement”). When raising money to fund the installation of the elevator along with other modifications including accessible bathrooms and handrails, a thank-you letter was sent out to supporters. “All areas of our building are now usable in a way that was not possible before. The elevator to the Great Hall has been most appreciated by people who otherwise were not able to use the stairs” (E. Paul Unger to “Friend”). This was the only specific of the renovation effort that was mentioned in the letter, so it shows that the church was very proud of the modifications it made to make the building more accessible.

The changes were made to the building not to go along with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) specifications, but to accommodate the disabled congregation members. “The provisions...shall not apply to...religious organizations or entities controlled by religious organizations, including places of worship” (42 United States Code §12187). Since the Wesley Church is obviously a place of worship and the Wesley Foundation is controlled by a religious organization, they do not have to obey the requirements set forth by the ADA for public accommodations. This shows that Wesley is truly an organization that has a powerful sense of inclusiveness. It is not bound by law to make changes, but instead the church and foundation made the changes with the congregation in mind. A set of automatic doors were put in place of regular doors back in 2004 (Tee Jay Central, Inc.) at the request of a student in a wheelchair because he had a severe case of cerebral palsy. The student had the Foundation propose to the Property Committee a need for an electric door opener so he and others could get through the doors and into the building without additional assistance. The project was relatively inexpensive with very good results, and it would not have happened if it weren’t for this student and his drive to make change happen.

Rev. Kirby also had some other stories to share in how the Wesley Church and Foundation has been accommodating to those with various disabilities. For example, there was a member of the congregation that was blind. She requested that all the lyrics to the songs, the readings from worship and the announcements be sent to her before the actual service on Sunday so she could print everything out with her special Braille printer. The church was very accommodating in this situation and trained the secretary how to format the weekly emails so the blind woman would be able to print them. Wesley will work with those with special needs on an individual basis. Persons with disabilities should feel welcome and included when they walk through the open doors of the Wesley Church and Foundation.

Besides working on a strictly individual basis, Wesley has many accommodations for anyone and everyone who desires their use. For example, there are two elevators, five entrances to the building with a ramp or level access, two handicap accessible restrooms, and other small building modifications. Also, greeters, ushers, and communion stewards are trained on how to deal with people with disabilities in various situations. For the visually impaired, large print bulletins and announcements are available. There are also tags for pictures and images sent out in emails so the images can be described to those who cannot see them. There is hearing assist technology that allows the hearing impaired to have an earpiece that magnifies the sounds going through the speakers. Sermons have been transcribed in the past and could be transcribed now if the need arose. At the state and national levels, the United Methodist Church has a signer at all conferences. The Wesley Church and Foundation is open to making changes in order to welcome more people into the building and into the congregation no matter who they are. There is even an Inclusiveness Committee for varying diversities, including disability, at all levels of the church.

As Rev. Kirby put it, Wesley has a “warm and welcome environment” for people with physical, emotional, and mental conditions.

The only major problem for the physically handicapped is that that altar is not accessible—there are three stairs. In the United Methodist Church, the altar has a very symbolic meaning. “Often, those in the congregation are invited to come to the altar for prayer or for special services such as baptism or reception into membership” (“altar”). If membership and baptism depends somewhat on the altar, how are people with disabilities expected to be part of the church? The service can be moved to a different part of the sanctuary, but it loses some of its meaning. The altar is a place where someone can be in direct communion with God. Some congregations even take communion from the altar. Without access to this key part of the church, persons with physical disabilities cannot get closer to God. They cannot climb the ‘stairway to heaven,’ even if it is only three small steps. In a way, the United Methodist Church’s progressive recognition of rights has helped them by seeing people with disabilities as part of their community, but in doing so they have overlooked some of the theological aspects of inclusion and being closer to God.

While Wesley does not specifically minister to the disabled, it does help advocate disabled programs. There is no specific outreach to bring disabled people into Wesley, and there is not a specific disabled group within the church. However, the church does support help for those with disabilities. The United Methodist Church wants to “develop the larger concern of advocacy for people with disabilities” (“The Church and People with...Disabilities). Wesley works with the ASSIST program in providing space and making the facility available five days a week. This Champaign school district-sponsored program is for high school students who do not have the physical or mental ability to stay in public schools. Rev. Kirby wishes the church did more advocacy work. He also thinks more could be done to reach out to the disabled. One way of

reaching out to this group of people is to do a better job communicated specifically to the disabled in the papers Wesley prints and distributes. Rev. Kirby thinks there should be more written about how accessible the building is and how willing the congregation is to help with whatever is asked of them.

The disability rights movement has had a clear impact on the church. Before the movement in the 1960s, the disabled were considered objects of charity. It has only been in the past few decades that people with disabilities have been recognized with having rights. The United Methodist Church “urge[s] social practices that will uphold the rights of...disabled persons” (“Church and Society”). Rev. Kirby thinks that the Wesley Church and Foundation does this in three ways: first, by “creating a physical environment where people with disabilities can easily access programs and ministries;” second, by “creating an atmosphere where people with various abilities are warmly welcomed, accepted, and assisted if needed; and third, by “working with political administration systems that help their causes.” These three ways of showing the inclusiveness of the Wesley Church and Foundation provide evidence that Wesley is a good example of what the United Methodist Church as a whole wants to do to include everyone, including people with disabilities.

The United Methodist Church “affirm[s the disabled] their rightful place in both the Church and society... We [the United Methodist Church] urge the Church and society to recognize and receive the gifts of persons with disabilities to enable them to be full participants in the community of faith” (“Rights of Persons with Disabilities”). The United Methodist Church seems to have been learning from the disability rights movement and from people with disabilities. They strive to be on the most progressive end in recognizing people with disabilities as people with rights. The United Methodist Church as a whole seems to be proactive rather than reactive.

Wesley, on the other hand, seems to be more reactive rather than proactive. They cannot seem to imagine the more specific needs of the disabled, and until someone agitates for the change, nothing happens.

This study is limited in the fact that it only takes a closer look at the United Methodist Church and the Wesley Church and Foundation. Further research could be done in other United Methodist churches to see if the beliefs expressed on the denomination's website are universal in all congregations. Also, the research could be extended to include multiple denominations and their views on disabilities. It could be that the United Methodist Church is somewhat ahead of its time in relation to the treatment and views of the disabled. On the other hand, the United Methodist Church could be behind in its social view compared to other religious organizations. Only further research on this topic can give more conclusive and detailed results.

The United Methodist Church as a whole has a great set of values, social principles, and resolutions regarding disability. However, based on my findings, Wesley United Methodist Church and Foundation can make some improvements with regard to people with disabilities. First, Wesley needs to make itself more known in the community as handicap accessible and welcoming to those with all kinds of disabilities. People with disabilities may not know there is a faith community so interested in integrating the disabled into society. Second, Wesley should adopt a more active approach to accessibility. A lot of the building changes were made upon request of a person with disability. A more active approach may help to achieve the larger goal of advocacy that Rev. Kirby would like to see. Third, there is one major renovation that needs to be done. The altar is not accessible. The altar is a church symbol representing a place where someone can directly be in communion with God. Since someone in a wheelchair is not able to get

to the altar, it make be seen as a wall separating the disabled from God. This tarnishes the image that the church is trying to protect: inclusiveness and equal rights for all.

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